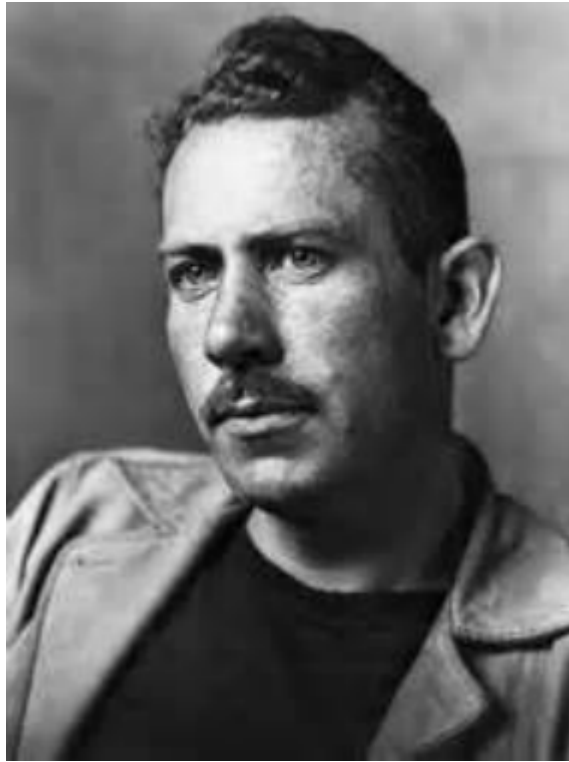


ANALYSIS

“The Snake” (1938)



John Steinbeck

(1902-1968)

Dr. Phillips wears rubber boots that insulate him from his environment, collects specimens in shallow tide pools and lives in his head, his laboratory. The word *head* is a thematic motif, repeated throughout the story. His lab stands partly on land and partly on piers over the ocean bay, just as his consciousness is partly founded on a solid foundation of facts and is partly dissociated from his unconscious, the sea. The story reveals what is under the water. In this story Steinbeck analyzes a scientist’s “dissociation of sensibility,” the separation of head from heart that Hawthorne saw as breaking the “magnetic chain of humanity” and that T. S. diagnosed as a cause of spiritual death in the modern world.

In his lab Dr. Phillips looks at his caged rattlesnakes: “every head was clear.” He has the “preoccupied eyes of one who looks through a microscope a great deal.” Objective consciousness requires dissociation from subjectivity, from feelings evoked here by the fluid movements of the sea. “The little waves washed quietly about the pilings under the building.” The ascetic scientist sleeps in a “cell” like a prisoner in his mind, furnished only by an army cot and “an uncomfortable wooden chair.” He appears to be a workaholic loner without any family or pastoral dimension to his life.

Doctors have been used to represent dissociation of the head from the heart because they must do this in order to function efficiently, like soldiers. The danger is that dissociation can become a fixed condition, as exemplified by Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter* by Hawthorne, the Civil War battlefield doctor in “An Episode of War” by Crane, and Doc Adams in “Indian Camp” by Hemingway. Dr. Phillips feeds his rats and kills a cat, inverting normal values. And it feels perverse when he picks up the cat “gently” and pets her for a moment before he drops her into a box and gases her to death. He dissociates his feelings from his

actions. He ignores “the short soft struggle” in the box and pets some other cat. At the time this story was written, the Nazis in Germany were preparing to gas millions of people they considered a pestilence like rats. “The waves washed with little sighs against the piles under the floor.”

He is interrupted at his work by a knock on the door. He opens to a strange woman “in a severe dark suit,” with “straight black hair” and “black eyes.” She is so emphatically dark and mysterious that she assumes the connotations of the Dark Lady, an icon of literary tradition, turning the realistic story into a psychological allegory. Her “soft throaty voice” is sexy and her eyes glitter as she watches him draw sperm from starfish and squirt it into a bowl of ova. With much sucking and squirting of sperm going on the scene becomes obscene. The impersonal ejaculator explains how he aborts babies in stages of development and mounts them on microscopic slides for study. She watches him with dark eyes that seem dilated. He is irritated when she is not interested in looking through his microscope. She “was almost in a state of suspended animation.” He thinks of her in comparison to a frog, the creature most often dissected in biology classes, but he has lost his objectivity: “A desire to arouse her grew in him.”

While he embalms the dead cat, the woman watches him with eyes that “seemed veiled with dust” like the rattlesnakes with “dusty eyes” in the third paragraph of the story. “The woman was making him nervous.... The waves under the building beat with little shocks on the piles.” He is more aware than usual of the natural rhythms of the waves. He shivers and adds fuel to his fire. “She seemed to awaken slowly, to come up out of some deep pool of consciousness. Her head raised and her dark dusty eyes moved about the room and then came back to him.” Her “deep pool” contrasts with the shallow tide pools he wades around in with rubber boots on. This strange dark sexy female he has never seen before by now seems to manifest his own sexuality, like an adolescent wet dream.

Dr. Phillips sublimates his sexuality in science and speaks impersonally of a snake in coition. Most readers since Freud will see the snake as such an obvious sex symbol that the oblivious Dr. Phillips seems comically obtuse. The Dark Lady wants to watch his snake have sex. When he goes to the entwined rattlesnakes, she appears beside him like a spirit: “He had not heard her get up from the chair. He had heard only the splash of water among the piles and the scampering of the rats.” This identifies her with the water, the ocean, as a personification of psychological depths. The snake she wants is dusty like her eyes. She wants to possess him. She pays for him and repeats “mine” so often she scares Dr. Phillips, who finds himself in the position of a pimp.

He agrees to let her watch the snake devour a rat. To him, in the past, “it’s simply a snake eating his dinner,” whereas she is exploiting the animal. “His tone had become acid. He hated people who made a sport of natural processes. He was not a sportsman but a biologist.” Yet he does not simply ask her to leave. She smiles with “thin lips” like a snake. He is shaken, avoids her eyes, feels “that it was profoundly wrong to put a rat into the cage, deeply sinful.” Sinful? The concept of sin contradicts the secular image of the scientist. Dr. Phillips feels that violating his professional principles would be not only immoral but a spiritual offense. He tries to reason himself out of guilt: “lots of people have dreams about the terror of snakes making the kill. I think because it is a subjective rat. The person is the rat. Once you see it the whole matter is objective. The rat is only a rat and the terror is removed.” This is a superficial Freudian view, that objective analysis by itself can cure a psychiatric problem.

Furthermore, Dr. Phillips himself is failing to be objective: This woman is not feeling terror but lust. When he lifts the rattlesnake into the feeding cage it forms a “big figure eight with its body,” the sign of infinity in physics, enlarging the significance of the snake symbol beyond sex. Despite his reluctant feelings, he does what the woman orders him to do and drops a rat in with the snake. “For some reason he was sorry for the rat, and such a feeling had never come to him before.” The tongue of the snake flicks “in and out rapidly.” The woman crouches and stiffens. “Dr. Phillips did not know whether the water sighed among the piles or whether the woman sighed.” The head of the snake “weaved slowly back and forth” and the woman “was weaving too.”

The kill is a mock sex act. “The fangs must have almost reached the heart.” In past centuries, the sex act has been seen as a “little death.” The rat is in the female role. “Its legs kicked spasmodically for a second and it was dead. The woman relaxed sleepily.” The snake approaches the rat and seems “to kiss it.” Finally

it opens its mouth. “Dr. Phillips put his will against his head to keep it from turning toward the woman.” Apparently he has been doing this all his life, avoiding sexual and emotional involvement. This phantom woman is perverse because she is a projection of his own unnatural denial of his sexuality. He thought, “If she’s opening her mouth, I’ll be sick.” His angry preoccupation with the woman disrupts his scientific procedure, he wastes his starfish specimens and he sees the dead cat as “crucified.” By now “the waves had fallen so that only a wet whisper came up through the floor.” Then the snake crawls into a corner and forms another figure eight, implying that creatures feeding upon each other is natural, universal and eternal. “It’s the most beautiful thing in the world.... It’s the most terrible thing in the world”—depending on what is in your head, on how you see it.

When the woman leaves, she tells Dr. Phillips she will be back to feed her snake (and have a vicarious orgasm) “every little while.” He will be her pornographer. He could hear her footsteps on his stairway “but he could not hear her walk away on the pavement.” As if she does not exist outside his lab. “I’ve read so much about psychological sex symbols,’ he thought. ‘It doesn’t seem to explain’.” Freud and his phallic symbol of the snake does not explain this experience. “Maybe I’m too much alone. Maybe I should kill the snake. If I knew—no, I can’t pray to anything.” He can’t pray because he does not believe in God. Yet this experience has prompted him to feel like a sinner and to consider killing the snake because it has come to symbolize evil, just as it did to Christ. At the same time, killing this innocent snake would be evil too, analogous to his repression of his sexuality.

In pre-Christian mythology the snake is not evil. The uroboros, a snake eating its own tail, symbolizes the universe—the totality of all that exists. Steinbeck believes like Whitman and D. H. Lawrence that spirituality includes sexuality. There is hope for Dr. Phillips because he is no longer fixed in dissociation. He is no longer literal-minded, he responds to symbolism and he has experienced the spiritual dimension. However, since the dark woman never returns and he continues to look for her without finding her, the implication is that he never has this wet dream again and remains isolated in his lab.

Michael Hollister (2013)